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Recover Alaska: Healing Alaska's Alcohol Problems

Marny Rivera and Tiffany Hall

Alcohol is used by a large segment of the population and is one of the most commonly abused substances. National surveys reveal that 7 out of 10 adults in the U.S. and Alaska drank alcohol in the past year and more than half of all adults report past month alcohol use. While alcohol is part of our social culture and frequently plays a role in celebrations, it is often a factor in tragedies. The National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence estimates that alcohol is a factor in 40 percent of all violent crimes, and is often an element in non-stranger violence, including intimate partner violence, sexual assault, and child abuse.

Excessive alcohol use has enormous social and economic costs. In Alaska parental

alcohol abuse has been cited by the Office of Children's Services (OCS) as the reason for a child's removal from the home in 31 to 47 percent of all maltreatment cases between 2011 and 2015. Both parental alcohol use and removal of a child from the home have lasting consequences for the family and the community. Another consequence of excessive alcohol use is alcohol-induced mortality. The alcohol-induced mortality rate for all Alaskans has remained at least twice as high as the average U.S. rate for over a decade, and has remained at least six times as high for Alaska Natives. In 2014, the age-adjusted alcohol-induced mortality rate in Alaska was 17.8 per 100,000 Alaskans while the average rate for the U.S. was 8.5 per 100,000 (see Figure 1, page 11). Many individual projects and programs have previously been implemented to address the harmful consequences of alcohol use in our state. But until recently Alaska has lacked a coordinated, multi-pronged response to alcohol problems.

Over the past few years an innovative approach—Recover Alaska—has evolved to address Alaska's alcohol-related problems. This initiative aims to reduce excessive alcohol use and related harm in Alaska by

influencing social norms and perceptions about alcohol use and abuse. Through bringing together stakeholders statewide, Recover Alaska seeks more coordinated responses to alcohol-related issues. It also advocates for change in systems and for effective laws and policies about alcohol. Recover Alaska was developed by a group of knowledgeable and influential funding partners—Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Mat-Su Health Foundation, and Rasmuson Foundation. These organizations recognized the need for a comprehensive and coordinated approach to target alcohol problems in Alaska and brought together a statewide, multi-sector steering committee to consider strategies. Since then, South-central Foundation, Providence Health and Services, and the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services have joined in supporting the Recover Alaska initiative.

This article provides a brief overview of the strategies being implemented by Recover Alaska to achieve its mission. An important element of the initiative is an evaluation plan to gauge the impact of this new approach to alcohol abuse.

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Editor's Goodbye

With this issue of the *Alaska Justice Forum*, my eight-year tenure as editor ends. It has been my privilege to build on the foundation created by my predecessor, Antonia Moras, who edited this publication for over 20 years. I want to thank all the university and community partners who have contributed to publishing Alaska justice research, especially our Justice faculty and staff, and guest authors. And I also want to express my appreciation to all those in the Justice community, public and private entities, and individuals across the state, who have so generously given of their time to assist in answering questions and providing data for a variety of articles and topics. Lastly, I want to acknowledge the assistance of the *Forum* editorial board and the Justice Center Publication Specialist. With their help, the roughly drafted articles and statistical tables and charts are turned into a polished publication.

"Leading Alaska to a safer, healthier, and more just society" is the Justice Center's vision statement. The goal of the *Forum* is to contribute to that vision. I have tried to ensure that the articles in the *Forum* continue to focus on the broad landscape of justice issues and look at the connection between public health and justice. My aim has always been to be an advocate for our readers so that research and information are presented in a way that is accessible and interesting to the general reader, as well as to specialists in the field, practitioners, and academics. By providing research and analysis on an array of justice topics to legislators, agencies, policymakers, and the university and general community, the *Forum* serves an important role in Alaska. We hope to engage our readers in a conversation about these issues and to keep the conversation going. I am grateful to have been a part of this process.

— *Barbara Armstrong*

Recover Alaska

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Working with the Media

Recover Alaska has partnered with television, radio, print, and online media to increase coverage of alcohol-related issues in Alaska, and has also utilized social media to engage and inform Alaskans. This strategy involved moving from passive monitoring and reactive media stories on alcohol-related issues to a targeted effort designed specifically to influence social, political, and media environments around alcohol. As part of this partnership, reporters developed investigative journalism pieces on the impact of alcohol in Alaska in a 2013–2014 series of *Anchorage Daily News* articles entitled “State of Intoxication.” In 2015, the *Fairbanks Daily News-Miner* began a year-long project entitled “Paths to Recovery,” which focused on finding solutions to Alaska’s alcohol problem.

Recover Alaska has also provided financial and other support for a “Be [You]” social norms media campaign launched by the Alaska Wellness Coalition in 2015. One of the prominent media messages included “78% of Alaska teens do not drink.” This statewide media campaign sought to use positive messaging presented in television commercials, radio ads, and social media sites to challenge the misconception that most teens drink alcohol—such misconceptions can actually increase unhealthy behaviors. Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) show that youth use of alcohol in Alaska has actually declined over the period 2009–2015. Nonetheless, a number of youth still use alcohol, and

prevention and education strategies need to be directed to this group.

Another Recover Alaska social norms project, created in partnership with the FM radio station KNBA 90.3, is the “Day 001—Voices of Recovery” series. This campaign features a website and an eight-part video and radio series celebrating true stories of Alaskans overcoming alcohol addiction. The project launched in early 2016. The videos aired on broadcast TV throughout Alaska, as well as on social media across the state and around the world. A diverse range of Alaskans including professionals, artists, and students tell their personal stories of recovery in the form of mini-documentaries, reflecting on where their recovery journeys have taken them. The video series aims to show other Alaskans struggling with alcohol addiction that recovery is possible and that living a sober life is achievable.

Alcohol Treatment Resources

There is substantial unmet demand for alcohol use treatment in Alaska. Between 2010 and 2014 an average of about 48,000 Alaskans aged 12 or older (7.3%) abused or were dependent on alcohol according to estimates from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health. Among the roughly 48,000 Alaskans who abused or were dependent on alcohol only about 11 percent reported that they received treatment for alcohol use in the past year while 89 percent did not receive treatment. To address the dearth of information about treatment options and to connect Alaskans in need of alcohol treatment with treatment services, Recover Alaska launched a one-stop referral source for alcohol abuse prevention and treatment services. The

Recover Alaska Resource Center (RARC) is a specialized resource navigation system that consists of a full-time information and referral specialist at the statewide phone line 2-1-1 administered by United Way of Anchorage, as well as a dedicated website at www.recoveralaska.org. RARC provides confidential referral information for assessment and appropriate treatment options. On the RARC website visitors can find information and FAQs about alcohol, personal stories of recovery, news and events, and a self-administered alcohol use screening tool.

RARC will be collecting data on the extent of treatment services needed and the ability of Alaskans to access alcohol abuse assessment and appropriate treatment services. This data will be used to improve RARC resources and ultimately to increase the number of Alaskans who receive appropriate levels of alcohol abuse treatment services based on their need. The hope is to connect Alaskans with the various treatment and support resources currently available to them. Through this project Recover Alaska hopes to better understand the services needed in order to advocate for increased treatment resources such as early intervention, outpatient, and residential/inpatient services.

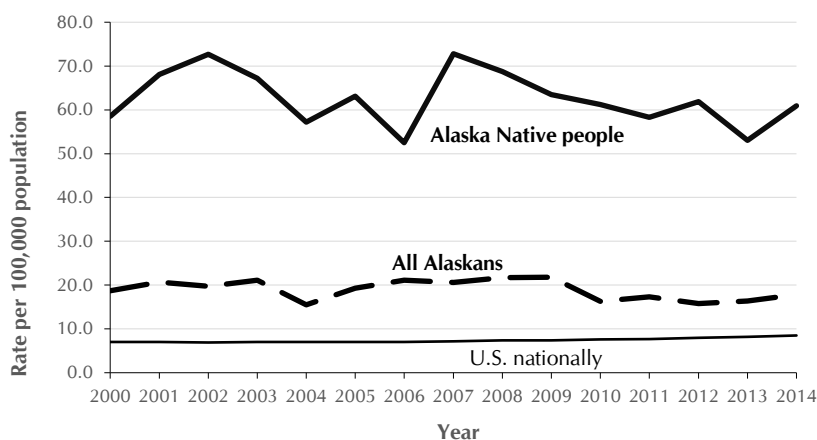
Alcohol Policy Advocacy

Recover Alaska is working to coordinate local and statewide coalitions to mobilize and advocate for the passage of local and state laws and regulations involving key alcohol-related issues. The goal is to inform local policymakers and state legislators about alcohol-related problems and proven policy solutions such as increasing alcohol tax rates, enforcing age-related restrictions on purchase, and allocating resources to appropriately fund prevention efforts and enhance substance abuse treatment capacity. During the 2016 legislative session, Recover Alaska worked with other health and safety representatives and alcohol industry members in support of Senate Bill 165—Alcohol: Board; Minors; Marijuana Checks. The bill was passed, changing the penalties for minors consuming alcohol offenses and the composition of the Alcoholic Beverage Control Board.

Evaluation and Measuring Impact

The agencies and staff involved with the Recover Alaska initiative realize that changing social norms and behavior regarding alcohol use in Alaska will take time, but Recover Alaska has already begun

Figure 1. Alcohol-Induced Mortality Rate in Alaska and U.S., 2000–2014
Rate per 100,000 population (age-adjusted).



Source of data: Alaska Department of Health and Social Services' Indicator-Based Information System for Public Health (AK-IBIS), <http://ibis.dhss.alaska.gov/indicator/view/AlcInducedDth.HAR.html> (as published 26 Oct 2016)



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documenting the initiative's successes and planning strategies to measure its impacts. Early in the process Recover Alaska contracted with an evaluation team that is compiling data on social norms and perceptions, alcohol consumption, and consequences of alcohol use in Alaska. This alcohol-related data will be presented in a dashboard format. The dashboard will describe alcohol-related problems in Alaska and serve as a baseline from which to measure the short- and long-term impacts of Recover Alaska's efforts. The evaluation team is led by Dr. David Tarcy of Alaska Research and Evaluation Services. Other team members include Dr. Marny Rivera, faculty in the UAA Justice Center, and Dr.

Dale Cope in the Center for Assessment and Accountability Research and Design in Kansas.

Conclusion

Recover Alaska's multi-agency, multi-pronged approach actively involving the media is one of the first efforts of this type in Alaska. This initiative—focused on alcohol-related problems—is unique nationwide because of its committed partners including state agency commissioners, Native corporations, legislators, judges, health organizations, and private foundations. The evaluation project will focus on a multi-year period and will provide constructive, ongoing information, and assess both the process and outcomes of Recover Alaska at the state level.

Marny Rivera is an associate professor in the Justice Center. Tiffany Hall is the executive director of Recover Alaska. This research was funded in part by the Alaska Children's Trust, Alaska Community Foundation, Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority, Alaska Native Tribal Health Consortium, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Bristol Bay Native Corporation, Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Doyon Limited, Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Foundation, Knight Foundation, Mat-Su Health Foundation, Providence Alaska Health and Services, Rasmuson Foundation, Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, Southcentral Foundation, Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, and Wells Fargo. The findings and conclusions presented are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of these foundations.

Resources

If you are interested in learning more or would like to get involved, please visit RecoverAlaska.org or contact executive director Tiffany Hall at thall@recoveralaska.org.

Alaska Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS)
(<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/Chronic/Pages/brfss/default.aspx>)

Alaska Department of Health and Social Services
(<http://dhss.alaska.gov/Pages/default.aspx>)

Alaska Mental Health Trust Authority (<http://mhtrust.org/>)

Alaska Office of Children's Services
(<http://dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/default.aspx>)
Statistics (<http://dhss.alaska.gov/ocs/Pages/statistics/default.aspx>)

Alaska State Legislature. (2016). Senate Bill 165: Alcohol: Board; Minors; Marijuana Checks (SB 165). 29th Alaska Legislature. (http://www.legis.state.ak.us/basis/get_bill.asp?session=29&bill=SB165).

Alaska Wellness Coalition (<https://alaskawellness.org/>)

Alaska Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)
(<http://dhss.alaska.gov/dph/chronic/pages/yrbs/yrbs.aspx>)

Anchorage Daily News. (2013–2014). "State of Intoxication" (series). (<https://www.adn.com/section/projects/state-of-intoxication/>).

Day 001: Voices of Recovery (<http://www.day001.org/>)

Be [You] (<http://beyoualaska.com/>)

Fairbanks Daily News-Miner. (2015–2016). "Paths to Recovery" (series). (<http://www.newsminer.com/news/akrecovery/>).

Mat-Su Health Foundation (<http://www.healthymatsu.org/>)

National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence
(<https://www.ncadd.org/>)

Providence Health and Services
(<http://www2.providence.org/Pages/default.aspx>)

Rasmuson Foundation (<http://www.rasmuson.org/>)

Recover Alaska (<http://recoveralaska.org/>)

Recover Alaska Facebook page
(<https://www.facebook.com/recoveralaska/>)

Recover Alaska Resource Center
(<http://recoveralaska.org/gethelp/>)

Southcentral Foundation (<https://www.southcentralfoundation.com/>)